

101

MONTUNOS

by *Rebeca Mauleón-Santana*

Author of the
Salsa Guidebook

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About The Author

Pianist, composer, author and educator **Rebeca Mauleón** has been a mainstay in the Latin Jazz and World Music scenes for over twenty years, having worked with such artists as Tito Puente, Carlos Santana, Steve Winwood, Cachao, Giovanni Hidalgo, Carlos “Patato” Valdez, Orestes Vilató and Mickey Hart, and also fronts her own powerhouse ensemble, Round Trip. She is also the author of the critically-acclaimed *Salsa Guidebook for Piano and Ensemble*, and is much in-demand as a recording artist, teacher, lecturer and clinician specializing in Afro-Cuban music. Rebeca holds a Masters Degree in composition, and teaches at Stanford University, City College of San Francisco and the Jazz School in Berkeley, among others. She tours and performs regularly with her Round Trip ensemble, as well as with Mickey Hart’s Planet Drum.

Sobre la autora

La pianista, compositora, autora y profesora **Rebeca Mauleón** ha mantenido una presencia firme dentro del mundo del jazz latino y el “world music” por más de 20 años, y ha trabajado con reconocidos artistas como Tito Puente, Carlos Santana, Steve Winwood, Cachao, Giovanni Hidalgo, Carlos “Patato” Valdez, Orestes Vilató y Mickey Hart. Es también directora de su propio grupo, Round Trip. Es autora del aclamado libro, el *Salsa Guidebook for Piano and Ensemble*, y es muy solicitada como música de estudio de grabación, tanto como profesora, conferencista y directora de programas educativos, especializada en la música afrocubana. Tiene su maestría en composición, y es profesora en Stanford University, City College of San Francisco y el Jazz School de Berkeley, entre otros. Trabaja consistentemente haciendo presentaciones y giras con su grupo Round Trip, tanto como el grupo Planet Drum de Mickey Hart.

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Introduction

In the Caribbean area as well as the United States and elsewhere, musicians of all backgrounds have contributed to what many refer to as “Salsa,” “Latin Jazz” or “Afro-Caribbean” music today. Primary forces include the music of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, and of course, New York City. Generally speaking, the difference in terminology often has to do with dance music versus concert music, so “Salsa” would refer to music designed primarily for a dancing audience, while “Latin Jazz” would cater to more of a listening crowd. The term “Salsa”¹ can be seen as a metaphor: it is a spicy sauce containing many ingredients. No matter what the name, however, many of the roots of this music are inexorably linked to Cuba’s musical legacy.

This book is the combined result of many years of research, performance and investigation into the marvels of Afro-Caribbean piano-playing. In the previous book—the *Salsa Guidebook for Piano and Ensemble*—I sought to present an overview of the various elements of the “Salsa” ensemble, with some historical as well as technical guides on how to interpret this music. This reference is strongly recommended for anyone interested in acquiring further information about this complex family of styles and genres we often call “Latin” music (for lack of a better word). For purposes of clarity, this book will use the blanket term “Afro-Caribbean” in order to identify the musical styles described throughout. It goes without saying that as a performer of any particular style of music, it is imperative that as much information as possible pertaining to all of the instruments in the ensemble be understood on some elementary level.

Much of the terminology associated with this music, as well as the primary musical ancestors or precursors of Afro-Caribbean music, are rooted in the Cuban tradition. The term *montuno* has several meanings, so I thought it necessary to clarify any questions or concerns about the word right from the start. In Afro-Cuban music, much of the terminology which has evolved in the popular music genre is linked directly to popular culture, such as through slang. Of course, Afro-Cuban culture and history are deep and complex subjects in and of themselves, and merit further research. But it is important to note that much of what we call Afro-Cuban, Salsa, Afro-Caribbean and Latin Jazz music has specifically evolved from the “street” culture which shaped Cuba’s popular music throughout the past several decades (and well before the twentieth century). This was not a genre which was recognized (or much less offered) by academic institutions, although its roots certainly contain elements of Western classical forms. But it is the combination of these European forms with the strong African, Spanish and Afro-Cuban (or “Creole”) elements present in Cuba’s rich and diverse musical heritage, which brought forth styles and genres which are clearly the result of true mixture. Also, many of the popular terms used by contemporary Afro-Caribbean musicians were created or coined in the United States, Puerto Rico and elsewhere. Therefore, there is no exact way to pinpoint when or how many of the terms used in the music were created. Suffice it to say that they emerged for a variety of reasons, and their definitions are not written in stone.

The approximate literal translation of the word “montuno” would be “from the mountains.” As the primary roots of Afro-Cuban dance music evolved from the *son*, and the *son* was nurtured in Cuba’s mountainous Oriente Province by *campesinos* (peasants) and other working-class Cubans before migrating to the cities, one can assume that many of the creole terms of this Afro-Cuban culture made their way into the music.

After decades of transformation, cross-cultural merging and other events, *montuno* has come to refer to the vamp or ostinato section of most styles of Cuban music. It has also been extended to refer to the vamp section of any or all styles generally associated with Afro-Caribbean music, so that the vamp of *any* style may be referred to as the *montuno*. In modern-day “Salsa cubana”² terminology, many refer to additional refrain or vamp sections as the *sobre montuno* (sub *montuno*), to distinguish the main hook or refrain from subsequent variations. However, the main confusion lies in the use of this word to refer to the specific ostinato pattern played by the piano in the ensemble. In Cuba, for example, most pianists (and musicians in general) refer to the piano pattern as the *tumbao*, which is also used for the bass and conga drum patterns. In North America, however, there are some who

refer to the piano vamp as the *guajeo*, the term also used to identify ostinato patterns played by string instruments, as well as for some repeated horn lines. After years of tossing these terms back and forth, I've come to the conclusion that it is simply a matter of apples and oranges. There is no right or wrong answer; it is merely up to the individual.

Perhaps the more “serious” issue for the new-comer to this music is that of the *clave* pattern, or better yet, the concept of *clave*. One cannot assume to know anything about Afro-Caribbean music without having some degree of familiarity with this often elusive aspect. If you have any doubts, ask or consult other sources. The most important advice this author can give is not to become “obsessed” with the *clave*. It—like any other essential ingredient in the music—should be studied and applied, and may always be subject to individual interpretation. For purposes of clarity, Part I of this book contains an overview of the *clave* and its relationship to the piano patterns. Also, the *clave* direction is always indicated at the beginning of each exercise. It is recommended that the examples in this book be played with the *clave* (and rhythm section) when possible.

The purpose of *101 Montunos* is to explore in detail the role of the piano in the various types of rhythmic styles associated with Afro-Caribbean music, and to demonstrate the highly improvisational nature of the piano's primarily rhythmic as well as harmonic function. The rhythmic styles presented here run the gamut of generations and cultures, and are presented in fairly chronological order according to their stages of development. Following the initial basic pattern for each style, a series of variations and developing patterns is given, showing some of the endless possibilities for more advanced *montuno*-playing. When noted, stylistic references pointing to specific pianists (or other musicians) will be indicated, particularly in relation to changes or innovations in how patterns are played. This is important for several reasons, the least of which is the personal nature of Afro-Caribbean music and its never-ending evolution.

This book also includes fragments of solo transcriptions by several renown pianists, highlighting various segments of the book with some of the most memorable improvisations by the best in the field. The companion CD features all of the *montuno* examples in the book as performed by the author, and when noted includes a rhythm section accompaniment in order to demonstrate the patterns within a larger context. The *montunos* which are transcribed from outside sources are listed as “figures,” and are highly recommended for listening. It is hoped that this work will aid the pianist (or other instrumentalist) in discovering the limitless possibilities for playing Afro-Caribbean music. Even in the most traditional, dance-oriented context, the interpretation of this music should never be stagnant or boring, especially for the performer! There is always room to improvise, even on the smallest or most subtle level, and creative *montuno*-playing is the first step in becoming a solid Afro-Caribbean pianist. But perhaps the most valuable lesson of all is that Afro-Caribbean music is not merely a collection of patterns; it is a language which must be studied, and, more importantly, felt. No method book can adequately represent the nuances of stylistic interpretation that go into the creation of a music, particularly for a style so rich in oral tradition.

¹ The Spanish word “salsa” literally means “sauce,” and refers to the hot sauce commonly used in various Latin American diets. In the late 1960s and early 70s, this term was coined in the New York area for the purposes of marketing what was already recognized as Afro-Cuban-based music, much of it interpreted over the decades by Puerto Rican and other Latin as well as North American musicians. For years (and into today), there has existed a controversy surrounding the use of the word “salsa” to refer to the music which—in its primary structure—is essentially the Cuban *son* form.

² The term “salsa cubana” was coined by several record companies as well as groups in the 90s in order to distinguish the contemporary dance music coming out of Cuba from the more commercially successful “salsa” such as that from Puerto Rico and New York. The endless debate between the use of the words “salsa” and “son” to identify Afro-Caribbean music with mostly Cuban roots continues today, and this new twist has generated even more controversy.

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Part I

A Review of the Clave

What is this thing called “*clave*?” For purposes of brevity, I will forego the immense (and quite detailed) analysis of the origins and development of this phenomenon, and focus on the basic technical aspects which should help the reader on the most fundamental levels.³ In a nutshell, the *clave* is all at once an instrument (referred to in plural form as *claves*), a rhythmic pattern (actually several different rhythmic patterns, depending on the style and genre of music played), and more importantly, a concept which serves as the foundation for the “correct” interpretation of Afro-Caribbean music. I use the word “correct” loosely, given that there is no way to justify what is or isn’t correct in the artistic arena. This is merely stated to illustrate that—as with any other form of musical expression—Afro-Caribbean music also has its techniques of playing, mannerisms and idiosyncrasies.

There are a number of different *clave* patterns which have evolved over the centuries, and the primary roots of these patterns come from West and Central African music. In the Caribbean area, there are specifically two countries which have developed and incorporated these patterns into their vast musical traditions, both in sacred as well as secular musics: Brazil and Cuba. For purposes of clarity, it is necessary to distinguish what is referred to in this book as “Afro-Caribbean” music as that which has primarily Afro-Cuban roots, so that Brazilian music—although containing its own form of *clave*—would not be included in the same category. This is not to say that people who play or compose within the Afro-Caribbean genre exclude Brazilian music from their repertoire. On the contrary, it is more often the case that one will enhance one’s repertoire to include *sambas*, *bossa novas*, *partido altos* and other Brazilian styles, if only for the sheer beauty of playing this rich and diverse music. However, if we must categorize the music, we would say that Afro-Caribbean music generally focuses on Afro-Cuban-oriented patterns, and also includes Puerto Rican and other influences.

Primera Parte

Un repaso de la clave

¿Qué cosa es la clave? Para mayor brevedad, abordaré el tema desde sus orígenes y su desarrollo para enfocar los aspectos técnicos básicos que ayudarán al lector de manera fundamental. En suma, la clave es en sí un instrumento (al que se refiere como “claves”), un patrón rítmico (en realidad varios patrones distintos según el estilo o género musical), y sobre todo, un concepto que sirve como base para la interpretación “correcta” de la música afrocaribeña. La palabra “correcta” es un poco difícil de justificar a la hora de hablar de asuntos artísticos, pero es importante ilustrar que la música afrocaribeña—tanto como otros géneros musicales—tiene su técnica, sus manierismos y su idiosincrasia.

Existen varios patrones de clave que han evolucionado a través de los siglos, y sus raíces principales provienen de la música africana occidental y central. En Latinoamérica, los dos países principales que han desarrollado estos patrones en sus tradiciones musicales, tanto en la música sagrada como profana, son Brazil y Cuba. Para mayor claridad en este libro, es necesario distinguir la denominada música “afrocaribeña” como una música con raíces principalmente afrocubanas, de manera que separaríamos a Brazil en otra categoría (aunque Brazil tiene su propio tipo de clave). Esto no quiere decir que los intérpretes o compositores de la música afrocaribeña excluyan la música brasileña de su repertorio. Al contrario, es muy común que el músico encarezca su repertorio con *sambas*, *bossa novas*, *partido altos* y otros estilos brasileños, tan solo para tener la oportunidad de tocar esta música tan rica y diversa. De todas formas, si tenemos que definir o categorizar la música afrocaribeña, diríamos que el enfoque principal son los patrones de origen afrocubano, y que también incluye influencias puertorriqueñas y otras.

Afro-Caribbean music: the *son*. It is the *tres* which literally shaped the piano's role within the structure of Cuban popular music in the early 1940's, when the piano would be officially incorporated into dance band format known as the *conjunto*. In the mean time, Cuban pianists stuck to the more through-composed European approach of the common practice period.

THE CUBAN DANZON AND ITS PRECURSORS

By the early 19th century, Cuban pianists and composers began experimenting with many of the rhythmic elements created on the island, bringing about a new indigenous sound. One of the pioneers of Cuban musical nationalism was **Manuel Saumell** (1817-1870), whose body of works included many solo piano pieces based on Cuban Creole styles, including the aforementioned *contradanza*, a style written in both 2/4 as well as 6/8 meter. The following is an excerpt of one of his best-known *contradanzas* (in 2/4), entitled "Los Ojos de Pepa" (Fig. A):

Fig. A. "Los Ojos de Pepa," by Manuel Saumell, c. 1840.

The musical score for "Los Ojos de Pepa" is presented in two systems. The first system begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 84. The music is in 2/4 time and features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. The second system continues the piece, ending with a *ritard* marking and "(etc.)".

Another of Cuba's most prolific early nationalists was pianist/composer **Ignacio Cervantes** (1847-1905), whose skill as a

instrumento típico del *son*, el predecesor más importante de la música popular afrocaribeña de hoy. Es el tres que literalmente formó el papel del piano dentro de la estructura de la música popular cubana a principio de los años cuarenta, cuando el piano se incorporaría oficialmente al formato del grupo musical para baile conocido como conjunto. Mientras tanto, los pianistas cubanos se adhirieron al acercamiento más compuesto europeo del período de la práctica común.

EL DANZON CUBANO Y SUS PRECURSORES

Para comienzos del siglo diecinueve los pianistas y compositores cubanos empezaron a experimentar con muchos de los elementos rítmicos creados en la isla, produciendo un nuevo sonido indígena. Uno de los pioneros del nacionalismo musical cubano fue **Manuel Saumell** (1817-1870), cuyo cuerpo de obras incluyó muchas piezas para solo de piano basadas en estilos criollos cubanos, incluyendo la *contradanza* antes mencionada, un estilo compuesto en compás de 2 por 4 o 6 por 8. Lo que sigue es un fragmento de una de sus más conocidas *contradanzas* en 2 por 4, titulada "Los ojos de Pepa" (Fig. A):

Otro de los más prolíficos nacionalistas primitivos de Cuba fué el pianista y compositor **Ignacio Cervantes** (1847-1905), cuyo

CD 1
Track
1

Ex. 1. "El Panameño," by Rebeca Mauleón, © 1997

Montuno Section

Am9

D9

Notice that the recording demonstrates several variations of the montuno pattern. To illustrate these variations, let's take a look at the most common patterns, beginning with the *montuno* of the 1940s classic *danzón* "Almendra," written by Abelardito Valdés (Ex. 2):

Nótese que la grabación demuestra algunas variaciones del patrón del montuno. Para ilustrar tales variaciones, echemos una vista a los patrones más comunes, comenzando con el montuno del *danzón* clásico de los años 40, escrito por Abelardito Valdés e intitolado "Almendra" (Ex. 2):

CD 1
Track
2Ex. 2. Traditional *montuno* pattern: *mambo* section of "Almendra," by Abelardito Valdés

The East Coast Sound

Without a doubt, New York City has always been at the forefront of musical innovation; it is the melting pot of cultures, and the most strategic point in the U.S. for creative exchange between people of diverse backgrounds. Throughout several decades of interaction between Cuban, Puerto Rican and other Caribbean musicians, New York pioneered “the sound” of Latin music on the grand scale. But following the Cuban Revolution, this sound continued on a more “traditional” path of previous generations, maintaining an approach very closely linked to the Cuban *son*, *mambo*, *guajira*, *guaracha* and *cha-cha-chá*. As the big band sound would soon loose out to smaller group formats (mostly for economic reasons), many groups explored other arenas.



Charlie Palmieri. Photo courtesy Max Salazar.

CHARANGA & PACHANGA

The early 1960s brought a huge boom of *charanga* music to New York, particularly with groups such as **Charlie Palmieri's La Duboney**, the orchestras of **José Fajardo** and **Belisario López**, and the artist who took the *charanga* to unprecedented heights during this period, **Johnny Pacheco**. Previously the flautist with the Duboney orchestra, Pacheco formed his own group and had enormous success with his version of the *pachanga*, a style popularized in Cuba in the mid-fifties by

piano mantuvo un papel basado en las fundaciones del son y sus variantes. Uno también debe tener en cuenta las innovaciones de instrumentos electrónicos, que indudablemente contribuyeron a la evolución de la música afrocaribeña.

El sonido de la costa del este

Sin dudas, la ciudad de Nueva York siempre ha estado al frente de la innovación musical, siendo la amalgama de culturas, y el punto más estratégico dentro de los Estados Unidos para el intercambio cultural. A través de las varias décadas de intercambio entre músicos cubanos, puertorriqueños y otros caribeños, la ciudad de Nueva York inició el “sonido” de la música latina de manera superior. Pero después de la revolución cubana, éste sonido norteamericano mantuvo el camino mucho más tradicional de

las previas generaciones, ligándose a los géneros cubanos del son, el mambo, la guajira, la guaracha y el cha-cha-chá. Ya que los grupos grandes así como los del formato del jazzband pronto se vieron perdiendo la popularidad (debido más bien a razones económicas), muchos grupos exploraron otros territorios.

LA CHARANGA Y LA PACHANGA

En los comienzos de los años 60, la ciudad de Nueva York experimentó un “boom” de la charanga con grupos como el de **La Duboney** de **Charlie Palmieri**, las orquestas de **José**

Solo Transcription: "Al Ver Sus Campos," played by Oscar Hernández.

(etc.)

Suggested Listening: Among those pianists which truly exemplify the “New York/Puerto Rican” sound of the 70s and 80s are: Papo Lucca, Oscar Hernández, Sonny Bravo, Joe Torres, Eddie Palmieri, Larry Harlow, and many others.

SALSA ROMANTICA

By the 1980s, the Salsa world experienced fierce competition with the Dominican *merengue* (discussed in depth in Part IV), particularly because of the syncopated nature of Afro-Cuban based music and the complexity of the dance styles. *Merengue* was simply

Música recomendada: Entre los pianistas ejemplares del sonido neoyorquino y puertorriqueño de los 70 y 80 son: Papo Lucca, Oscar Hernández, Sonny Bravo, Joe Torres, Eddie Palmieri, Larry Harlow y muchos más.

LA SALSA ROMANTICA

Para fines de los años 80, el mundo de la salsa experimentó mucha competición del *merengue* dominicano (del cual hablaremos en la Cuarta Parte), particularmente por la complejidad de la síncopa y del baile en la música afrocubana. El *merengue* era